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Observation of early childhood educators' interaction style and child experience – opportunities for training in context

Gabriela Portugal¹, Helena Luis²¹University of Aveiro-CIDTFF, ²School of Education of the Instituto Politécnico de Santarém

Abstract

Educational interactions between adults and children are essential in any learning process, but have a crucial role in early childhood education. Given the importance of the quality of the interactions in early childhood education for the well-being, development and learning of children, we present a proposal for analyzing children's living experiences and adult style, through child and adult engagement scales. These observation tools are particularly useful for training, professional development and improvement of teachers pedagogical practice. In this article the observation scales' contribution to training in context is evidenced through a series of testimonials from educators who, by reflection and attention given to child experience and their own style, experienced professional development and consequent improvement in the quality of their interaction and on the educational offer.

Keywords

Early childhood educator style; child's experience; engagement scales; training in context

Contacto:

Gabriela Portugal, University of Aveiro, Department of education and Psychology. 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal. gabriela.portugal@ua.pt

Helena Luís, Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico de Santarém, Complexo Andaluz, 2000 Santarém. helena.luis@ese.ipsantarem.pt

Observación del estilo del educador de infancia e experiencia del niño – posibilidades para la formación en contexto

Resumen

Las interacciones educativas entre los adultos y los niños son primordiales en cualquier proceso educativo, pero ganan una dimensión particular al nivel de la educación de infancia. Del reconocimiento de la importancia de la calidad de las interacciones en contextos de educación de la infancia para el bienestar, el desarrollo y el aprendizaje de los niños, se presenta una propuesta de análisis de la experiencia vivida por el niño y del estilo del adulto, a través de escalas de observación del involucramiento del niño y del adulto. Los instrumentos de observación son particularmente ventajosos en la formación, el desarrollo profesional práctico y la mejora de la práctica pedagógica de educadores de la infancia. En este artículo, se evidencia su relevancia para la formación en contexto a través de las palabras de educadores. La reflexión y la atención dada a la experiencia del niño y a su propio estilo docente, proporcionarían desarrollo profesional y consiguiente mejora de la calidad de su interacción con los niños y oferta educativa para la infancia.

Palabras-clave

Estilo del educador de infancia; experiencia del niño; escalas de involucramiento; formación en contexto

Introduction

During the last decades, studies developed on developmental psychology and neurosciences, which present data from a number of early intervention programs and from the unique experience of childhood professionals, have clearly demonstrated the importance of the quality of interpersonal relationships established in the first years of life (Portugal, 2009, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shore, 1997). In fact, research and practice have shown that the quality of the educators' attitudes have a direct impact on the children's development and learning, being the adult interaction style a critical factor in determining the quality of the learning experiences of children.

Children who experience well-being, strong feelings of security and of belonging have the best conditions for exploring, initiating interactions and learning. As Bertram and Pascal say (2006, p. 74), something substantially different will happen to shy, sad, aggressive, anxious or confused children. To these authors, a child who learns well is a child that has an well sustained exploratory impetus, interacting in a happy, open and creative way with the world, broadening its knowledge and understanding of reality. This exploration depends on the sense of security and connection with the people and the spaces with which the child interacts. It is this sense of security and of connection that allows children to "free" their natural curiosity and exploratory impulse. Still, this sense of security and connection allows the development of social and emotional skills in the children, making them available for interaction with others, for new opportunities and for expressing their needs and interests.

1. The experience or engagement of the child

Bertram and Pascal (ibid) believe that assessing the quality of child experience in a collective educational context should meet the following dimensions which are included in their *Child Engagement Scale*:

- A feeling of safety and connection (*connectedness*)
- Exploratory Drive
- Meaning making

The feeling of **safety and connection** (*connectedness*) of the child involves realizing how the child finds himself/herself in the world, given his/her degree of independence, cooperation, openness, attention, mood, vitality, engagement, empathy and sympathy (Bertram & Pascal, 2006, p. 74). We are considering here the degree of well-being experienced by the child that allows him/her to open up and explore the world (Laevers, 2005).

Meeting the **impetus or exploratory drive** of the child means seeking to understand the motivation for the child to discover and understand the world, the strength of his/her persistence and ability to focus. The ability of the child to be fully involved in the activity, mobilizing body, thought and emotion, is central to human development and can be observed even in younger children (Bertram & Pascal, 2006, p. 74). We should consider at this point, the levels of engagement or involvement of children, proposed by Laevers (Laevers, 1994; Laevers, 2005).

Understanding the **meaning making** of the child requires that we to meet his/her ability to construct hypotheses, use strategies, try different things, learn from mistakes, predict what might happen, recognise differences and similarities and be an intentional independent explorer with goals. This is consistent with the descriptors created by Laevers, when describing the "self-organization" quality and autonomy (Portugal & Laevers, 2010) as the will and ability to decide what is intended, mobilizing efforts to reach an end, decide on a method or plan of action, with flexibility to adjust plans if necessary.

An overall assessment of how these three dimensions are expressed by the child in response to interactions and learning opportunities offered in the nursery or kindergarten, provide a good perspective on the quality of the educational context, that is, on how it stimulates the social, emotional and cognitive development of children (Bertram & Pascal, 2006).

2. The adult style or engagement

Educational interactions between adults and children are essential in any educational process, but have a crucial role in early childhood education.

Adult behaviours' can be categorized as presenting features that facilitate the development and learning of the child (Bertram, & Pascal Laevers, 1996, p. 296; Bertram & Pascal, 2006, p. 81). Based on the perspective of Rogers (1961), the authors consider that children behave and learn better when they meet high standards of authenticity, experience positive reinforcement, acceptance, trust and empathy on the part of the adult. In this sense, they believe that children who are interact with educators that present these qualities tend to participate more actively, solve more problems, pose more questions and engage more in learning, as well as make more eye contact and display higher levels of cognition and creativity.

Laevers (1994) identified three dimensions or categories of behaviour of the educator that reflect these personal characteristics, which can facilitate the development and learning of the child – stimulation, sensitivity and autonomy.

The *Stimulation* dimension comprehends the categories of behavior of the educator that focus on introducing, submit or offer an activity to children; give information; intervene in a activity to stimulate action of children, their thinking or communication.

The *Sensitivity* dimension refers to the educator's behaviors that demonstrate that he recognizes and respect the feelings and the emotional well-being of the child. This dimension is closely linked with what is perceived as the child's needs. This includes adult behaviors that respond to the child needs with warmth and affection; or, behavior which recognize their need for attention, through encouragement, praise and support in response to the need for the value and safety of the child.

The *Autonomy* dimension includes the educator's behavior related to the degree of freedom given to children in the choice of activities and opportunities for experimentation. In this dimension are included adult actions that give children freedom to choose and determine the direction of the activity they want to perform; behaviors that demonstrate respect for the work and ideas of children and the evaluation they make of the final product of their activity; the opportunity provided for the child to negotiate, solve problems and conflicts; and, the behaviors that encourage child participation in the establishment and maintenance of rules.

In the same line of thought, the analysis and evaluation of the educational interaction and adult style led to an instrument of observation that came to prove particularly useful in the initial and in-service training of early childhood educators (Oliveira-Formosinho *et.al.*, 2009). We invoke here the scale *Adult-Child Observation Schedule -ASOS Form B* (Bertram, and Pascal Laevers, 1996). This scale was developed and used within the framework of a project of development of pre-school education in the United Kingdom – the Effective Early Learning Program –EEL, Pascal, Bertram *et al.*, 1996) following which the *Baby Effective Early Learning Project* (Baby-EEL) (Pascal & Bertram, 2006) centered in educational settings for children up to 3 years old. In this context, the scale takes the title of *Adult Engagement Scale* in assessing the availability of the educator in the task of supporting the development and learning of the child, that is, a set of personal qualities that determine the adult's ability to motivate, expand, promote and engage children in learning processes.

On the *Adult Engagement Scale* behavior is evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 values for each of three dimensions. The values 1 and 2 correspond to predominantly negative behaviors, the value 3 corresponds to the neutrality and the values 4 and 5 the predominantly positive behaviors. The characteristics of "no engagement" grades (level 1) and "high engagement" grades (level 5), described by Bertram and Pascal (2006, p. 85), are presented in table 2.

Level 2 corresponds to the negative pole, though not so extreme as with the level 1 and, conversely, the level 4 is the educator in the positive pole of the scale. The level 3 corresponds to the neutrality, i.e. when there is neither predominance of qualities of "engagement" nor "no engagement" "(enabling learning and development of children).

Table 1.

Adult Engagement Scale

	LEVEL 5	4	3	2	LEVEL 1
Sensitivity	<p>The adult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is warm and affectionate -Establishes physical contact and positive eyecontact -Praises the efforts and achievements of the child, respecting and valuing it -Shows empathy in relation to the needs and concerns of the child -Listening and responding appropriately to the child, including in conversations 				<p>The adult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is cold and distant -Praise indiscriminately -Criticizes and rejects the child, "lay down" -Confirms the failures and disabilities No evidence of empathy in relation to the needs and concerns of the child -Does not listen or does not respond properly to the child -Talk to others about the child as if he/ she weren't there
Stimulation	<p>The activities presented are pleasant and motivating (there is energy and liveliness)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The activities are appropriate, either from the cultural point of view, and the developmental point of view. -Proposals for activities are "open", integrating and extending children's interests. -The intervention stimulates the child to use all your senses. -The intervention seeks to link these activities with the play. -The intervention promotes flexible routines, allowing enough time for a play extended 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The intervention does not stimulate the child (lack enthusiasm, energy) -The activities are monotonous and repeated (lack richness and diversity) -The activities are "closed" without having into consideration the interests and motivations of children -The explanations are vague and confusing. No time to talk and listen to the child, or stimulate thinking -The intervention integrates ritualized and prolonged routines .

Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Adult stimulates child to be responsible for his/ her actions -Facilitates self-organization, "agency" and sense of responsibility of the child -Allows the child to choose and support his own ideas -Provides several opportunities for experimentation -Respect the time child chooses to finish an activity, respecting the assessment he/she does. -Encourages children to resolve conflict and negotiate rules 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The adult is dominant, "bossy" or "laissez-faire"; -The adult assumes the responsibilities rather than let the child do it -Does not give space to the child to choose or experimentation -Does not create negotiation with children -Does not encourage the sense of self-organization and self-worth of the child -Rules and routines are established rigidly
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Source: Bertram & Pascal (2006, p. 85)

The observation of adult engagement or style, as referred to by Bertram and Pascal (2006), is performed in the context of trust and partnership between all those involved in the education of children and in the idea that all learn together and in cooperation. It is considered essential the existence of a climate of trust and appreciation of each person but also the need to introduce mechanisms to assess and promote essential changes to improve the education of children. The observation of practices among peers through this Scale will only be possible with openness and honesty and if all partners recognize it as an effective mean to improve pedagogical practice. In this sense, it is considered essential the existence of some preconditions for observations to be productive. Thus, it is important that all involved have training and understand the intent of the observation of interactions with children; still, it is desirable that the observed can choose who will observe their interactions, being crucial the confidence and respect for who observes. Peer evaluation is an ongoing process through dialogue and exchanged ideas, aimed at training and professional development. As so, it is important that everyone gets feedback as soon as possible after the observation. In this process of observations feedback the emphasis should be placed on the positive aspects and facets to improve and develop must be explicit, avoiding personal criticism or comments. Giving meaning to this whole process, it should be given opportunities for improvement of practice following the observations.

Although the classification is proposed in 5 levels, as indicated above, the proposed observation of adult engagement or style should be given also to the engagement or experience of the child (in terms of security and sense of connection; exploratory drive and meaning making), assuming record and description of children's learning experiences that occur at the time of observation. It means that the quality of adult engagement needs to be seen by reference to their effect on the 'experience' or child's engagement quality.

So there is some efficacy in the implementation and results of these observations it is essential that the use of this scale is not seen as a sort of value attribution, as sometimes a numerical quantification seems to induce, but should be considered for its descriptive and analytical value of behaviors to promote in education. If it is considered in this way it can be an important instrument for educational organization and team reflection and where learning and professional development can take place.

3. Adult style observation and educational practice improvement

The observation of adult engagement or style can enable educators and other adults involved in the education of young children to realize their own practice and their intervention in each of the dimensions assessed.

"I thought you always had to guide and direct all activities of children (materials, groups, spaces, etc.) to be a good educator. To put me in a position of observation I was able to reflect on my own action and its impact on the child. Sometimes children were just passive spectators, only I was in activity. "

Noting his own style of intervention, the educators can reflect on their role in the stimulation of children's activities-will be taking frequent initiatives that lead the child to act, or on the contrary, they expect children to act for themselves? Have an interest in sharing different subjects with children, leading them to communicate and to reflect, or wait passively for questions of children?

"Looking at me through the dimensions of adult engagement, I think I'm pretty sensitive to the needs of the child with regard to the emotional and physical wellbeing but was wasting many opportunities to stimulate through challenging situations that really were to meet the child. Thought always in activities for the entire group and also in the light of the outcome – the Autumn leaf, the Easter egg, Christmas decorations ... When I started "looking" for the child during this type of activity, I realized that I wasn't learning much of anything ... I had chosen the colors, I'd take your hand to put in the right place "without spoiling". Who was I to stimulate to action, communicate or think? "

The educators will be more supported in reflection on their practice if, instead of saying that they should stimulate the child's development, you can spell out clearly how they can do. Being naturally curious children have great interest in the world. The educator plays a central role as a mediator of this discovery-"scaffolding"-that help. Children left by them, are unlikely to reach the same goals.

"I realized that it is important to create various opportunities for the child to have self-initiative and perform meaningful learning. For example, play along with the child, understand what she feels and the pleasure that this takes of every experience can be the role of the adult, that only by being attentive and available, can create a challenging environment for the child to develop autonomously but in presence of the other. "

"The activity was to fill a cardboard cut-out in the form of hat, gluing pieces of colored tissue paper. At the end the hats were hanging in the form of mobile. One of the children, started putting forward but after sticking to half a dozen papers said that his job was done. My reaction was immediate: ' Look what you got plenty of space with nothing stuck, keep pasting to fill everything and be more beautiful. The child stuck a few more papers, without any motivation or interest. Reflecting on my style, I realized that I wasn't even stimulating, or sensitive, or upgraded autonomy."

Likewise, the reflection on own practice can lead to educator to evaluate their sensitivity to the experiences of children. Will he /she understand the needs of affection, care and safety of children? Reflecting on his sensitivity, the educator must, simultaneously, be alert to the way the relationship with each child is perceived. Will he/she not play back negative relational patterns that the child might have developed in the context of family relationships? The educator should be aware of this possibility, evaluating their representations of the relationship with the children acting, not accentuating the "disadvantages" and allowing the child a new standard makes possible to have new relational new experiences and patterns in the relationship with himself/herself and with others.

"Reflecting on my style as an educator, I have also improved my action. For example, I have let the children paint as much as they want. I do not stop the activity just because the work we planned them to do is already done. Sometimes children end up one painting and I'll get some more paper and someone still say: but he did already... Because the idea is to make the task and that's it!. The idea is not to leave the child performing the activity, feeling and exploring its action over time he/she needs or wants?"

The educator must also examine whether the practice is leading to the autonomy of children. Sometimes, there seems to be a "misunderstanding" between promoting autonomy and the "abandonment" of the children themselves. The educator should assess whether children can make choices and make decisions but also helps in what children would like to do by them in a non-intrusive way. Is the educator establishing with them rules and the support when in conflict and supporting resolution between pairs? Does he /she give them space to experience?

"The understanding of the engagement dimensions changed radically the way I perform my tasks as an Educator in particular with regard to routines. I now realize that many times I wasn't really attentive to the needs of the child and that I was almost acting like in a "factory" in which the child was passing from adult to adult without realizing exactly what was happening to him/her – he /she is already with his diaper changed now can go and eat ...";

" I'm going to give a little help to be faster ... and pushed the spoon into the mouth of the child without asking him/her if help was wanted " In the daily routines of the child, I finally saw an opportunity to achieve the goals that were established in the educational project and, in fact, stimulate the child and promote their autonomy ".

"The adult engagement scale is undoubtedly a tool to promote the quality of the educational activity, helping us to go beyond, scaffolding the educational process [...] This "intentional" knowledge forces us to look, to discover how development takes place, which may affect or enhance the well-being and the involvement of the child [...], to decide how to interact, how to organize the environment, how to question, how to promote child experience. "

In summary, as we have pointed out (Luís & Calheiros, 2008; Luís, 1998, 2012), we consider that for the purposes of training in context and promoting the quality of childhood contexts the Adult Engagement Scale can be a good tool. Understanding the dimensions to be observed can help educators and other adults involved in the education of younger children to improve their practices, recognizing and reflecting on the most appropriate behavior in every situation ensuring that children experience fully "sense of security", "exploratory drive" and "meaning-making".

The knowledge and attention to observation dimensions proposed in the *adult Engagement Scale* can bring a relevant contribution to the promotion of quality of childhood contexts, training and professional development. Through training in context around the analysis of educational situations where the focus of the observation is the relationship between adults and children, the quality of the experience and the *commitment* of a child is enhanced.

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[1] Bertram e Pascal (2006, p. 75, 77 e 79) propose an assessment made in 5 levels, for each dimension of the child engagement, being the level 1 the worst from the point of view of the quality of the child's engagement and the level 5 the most positive.

[2] The Portuguese version of the “Effective Early Learning Program (EEL)” was named “Desenvolver a Qualidade em Parcerias (Projeto DQP) (Bertram e Pascal, 2009) and was coordinated by Júlia Oliveira-Formosinho.

Authors

Gabriela Portugal

Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro- Department of education and psychology, Teaching and technology research centre on training of trainers (CIDTFF). Main research interests: children's learning and development, experiential approach to education; evaluation and pedagogical innovation; the place of the play and educational potential of outer space; formation of kindergartners.

Helena Luís

Adjunct Professor at Santarém Polytechnic Institute in the Department of Curriculum and Education and researcher at the Santarem Polytechnic Institute Research Unit (UIPPS). Main research interests: children learning, play and imagination; supervision and teacher professional development, early childhood education curriculum.